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UNCLAS E F T O SECTION 01 OF 02 SKOPJE 000898

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/20/2016

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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: POLITICS TRUMPS FAITH -- ELECTION OF
NEW ISLAMIC COMMUNITY REIS

REF: SKOPJE 97

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4(B) & (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Self-proclaimed moderate Islamic cleric Sulejman Rexhepi was elected Reis-ul-Ulema (head) of the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) on September 20. The election itself was uneventful, but the electoral process was marred by the political intervention of ethnic Albanian governing coalition party DPA, which backed Rexhepi, claiming it was doing so to prevent Islamic fundamentalists from dominating the ICM. Ethnic Albanian opposition party DUI, which had backed Deputy Reis Bahri Aliu during his election earlier this year, did not actively support Aliu in his bid to become Reis. Continued political interference in ICM affairs is likely to keep that institution weak and unstable. End Summary.

NEW ISLAMIC COMMUNITY REIS ELECTED BY LANDSLIDE

¶2. (U) The Assembly of the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM) held elections for the ICM's Reis on September 20 in the Skopje suburb of Kondovo, seat of the Islamic Theological Faculty in Macedonia. Sulejman Rexhepi, a former Reis and self-proclaimed moderate Muslim cleric, was elected by a vote of 58-7 in balloting that ICM contacts tell us was uneventful and calm. There were, however, reports the night before that shots had been fired at ICM HQs in Skopje. Rival candidate Muhamed Iseni, the relatively unknown head of a local Islamic NGO, did not contest the results. The ICM had been without a Reis since July 2005, when the former Reis resigned after an armed group, allegedly linked to DPA activists in Kondovo, interrupted a meeting of the ICM Assembly and physically assaulted him.

POLITICAL PARTY LINKS TO ICM

¶3. (SBU) The election was called with less than a week's notice, following reports of pressure being applied by ethnic Albanian governing coalition party DPA on Macedonia's 13 muftis to accelerate the process. The election results came as no surprise, since Rexhepi was the DPA-backed candidate; there were credible field reports from ICM contacts and from OSCE observers in the days preceding the election that DPA pressured the muftis, using threats of violence, to support early elections and Rexhepi as their candidate. Immediately

following the election, Rexhepi was photographed exiting the Theological Faculty with Agim Krasniqi, a DPA member and known criminal kingpin in Kondovo.

¶4. (SBU) Deputy Reis Bahri Aliu, who had served as acting Reis since the former ICM leader's resignation in 2005, had hoped to compete for the Reis position but apparently was unable to muster support for his candidacy in the face of DPA pressure on the muftis and on other ICM members. During a September 12 meeting, he told P/E Chief that DPA was putting pressure on the ICM to accelerate the election process, which he had hoped to delay until early 2007, after Ramadan and the annual hajj.

¶5. (SBU) Admitting that ethnic Albanian opposition party DUI had provided his "logistical base" during a controversial election for the Deputy Reis position earlier this year, Aliu complained that DPA was sowing fear and uncertainty in the Islamic community to advance Rexhepi's candidacy. Aliu said DPA was claiming their candidate would fight Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism in the ICM, and that the USG supported Rexhepi.

¶6. (SBU/NF) In a follow-up conversation with DPA Vice President Menduh Thaci on September 12, P/E Chief said the Embassy was neutral with regard to the Reis candidates, that the ICM election process should take place in accordance with the ICM's standard procedures, and that the elections should be free of intimidation, pressure, or violence. Thaci replied that DPA could not stand idly by tensions mounted within the ICM between Islamic moderates and "wahhabists." He accused Deputy Reis Aliu of "financial manipulations" in the ICM, including misuse of ICM property, and called for a

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police investigation into the Community's finances.

RESTITUTION TWIST?

¶7. (SBU) According to some observers from the Tetovo area, DPA's sudden move to force early elections was strongly backed by Ljupco Georgievski, a former Prime Minister and de facto head of the ethnic Macedonian nationalist VMRO-NP, an opposition party. Georgievski's wife reportedly purchased from 1998-2000 several pieces of real estate in eastern Macedonia, that the ICM claims were confiscated from them during the Yugoslav era. Georgievski allegedly agreed to back DPA's ICM strategy in exchange for Rexhepi's pledge not to pursue ICM restitution proceedings against Georgievski's wife.

COFFER STUFFING?

¶8. (SBU) During the September 12 meeting with P/E Chief, Deputy Reis Aliu added to the speculation about DPA's motives, alleging that Thaci and his party were more interested in tapping the income that would flow into the ICM's coffers from the "zakat" (charitable contributions) Macedonia's Muslim faithful would make during Ramadan, and from the administrative fees pilgrims would pay hajj organizers. Thaci leveled the same accusations against Aliu, claiming that the Deputy Reis wanted to delay the elections until after the hajj, "when the ICM had stuffed its pockets with zakat contributions and hajj fees."

COMMENT

¶9. (SBU/NF) DPA's hand in the election -- it appears the party was able to muster support in the ICM to squash Aliu's candidacy while putting forward Iseni as a straw man to "oppose" Rexhepi -- continues the trend we have observed over the past year or more of direct political intervention by both DUI and DPA in the affairs of the Islamic community (reftel). Although Rexhepi may indeed prove to be a religious moderate who will work to counter Islamic fundamentalism in the ICM, the ongoing political tension

between DUI and DPA suggests the ICM will remain weak and unstable unless one of the parties gains absolute dominance over the institution, or both decide to leave matters of the faith to the faithful.

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